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ABSTRACT

A study examined American Indian students' perceptions of why schools are failing to meet their needs. Thirty-six American Indian high school students from Minnesota participated in three interviews that explored their background and experiences, instructional and non-instructional issues that affect the education of Indian students, and their perceptions of successful schooling and classroom practices. The students felt that good teachers provide active, experiential learning experiences and care for their students in a personal way. Racism and a lack of Indian content in the curriculum was a primary concern of many Indian students. Students were clear on the importance of American Indian content and culture in school and the significance of family and community in helping to develop a strong cultural identity. Indian youths join gangs as a replacement for family, but replacing the negative aspects of gang involvement with the positive aspects of Indian culture can keep youth out of gangs. The ideal school would have a large Indian peer group but also enough diversity to broaden students' minds. Students would have more freedom to work on independent projects, and Indian culture would be taught along with everybody else's culture. To date, the piecemeal approach to American Indian education has failed to break through institutional and overt racism--a more holistic approach is needed. (TD)

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Our Children's Songs: American Indian Students and the Schools

by Thomas Peacock and Elizabeth Albert

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Minnesota's American Indian students are at a critical point. The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force study in 1991 suggests that despite several decades of programs and efforts at both the federal and state level, and the efforts of tribes and American Indian organizations, overall dropout and achievement data for Indian students have not markedly improved. Their conclusions find the rates of educational failure uncomfortably similar to an earlier study, the Kennedy Report on Indian Education of 1968. Nationally, 40 percent of American Indian students drop out of school, and at the secondary level many of them lag two or more years behind their non-Indian peers on standardized achievement measures. In a typical state like Minnesota, 57 percent of the fourteen thousand Indian students will fail to complete the requirements for high school graduation. These figures have remained constant in spite of specific state and tribal efforts at improving Indian education: human relations training for teachers, Indian teacher training programs, American Indian language and culture programs, tribally operated schools and Indian magnet schools, American Indian social worker aides, and American Indian post-secondary preparation programs.

There are many obstacles to overcome to improve these dismal numbers, both in and out of school. The obstacles include low teacher expectations, poor tracking of student progress, inadequate financing of schools and education programs, few minority and American Indian teachers, issues with testing, teachers with little training in Indian educational issues, and a disregard for diversity in both educational standards and content. Studies have also cited economic, social, and health issues as confounding students and the schools that purport to educate them. Many Indian children face grinding poverty and all of its side effects: racism, negative peer pressure, hopelessness, and both a mistrust of educational systems and an absence of any educational

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legacy from their parents or other significant adults.

The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force points to schools as being essential to the social, cultural, and intellectual health of communities. And it points to literacy as essential to the well being of American Indian people. International congresses of indigenous people have come to similar conclusions.

Relatively few studies of these issues have considered what American Indian students themselves see as the issues or the solutions to these problems. One study, in 1993, interviewed sixty-five students (mostly Kiowa and Comanche, but representing over a dozen tribes) who attended public schools and found little difference in perceptions between Indian and non-Indian students. Like other studies of mainstream students, Indian students primarily identified friends and peer relationships as the most positive aspect of their schooling. Most of the students (75 percent) felt Indian students didn't have any particular problems in school because of their Indian heritage. The authors summed up their research by indicating, "the responses of most of the students did not reflect an Indian heritage. As high school students, these young people were not concerned very much about ethnicity."[1]

Other studies of minority students have looked closely at individual students, suggesting that resilience may have more to do with succeeding or failing in schools than making wholesale changes in schools or implementing new programs.

Like others before us, researchers have scoured Indian country seeking answers to the complex problems that American Indian students have in schools, but whether their research findings will find their way into classrooms in time to save this generation of Indian children is a serious question. As educators and policymakers struggle for answers, maybe its time we consider listening to the Indian students themselves—to their collective song. This study samples the collective voices of Minnesota's American Indian student population.

The study used in-depth phenomenological interviewing, based on a method developed for the study of community colleges by Irving Seidman and Patrick Sullivan. In this approach, the experience of the person being interviewed is considered to be as important as the subject being studied in coming to understand that subject. The interviewing strives to maximize the participants' rendering of their experience.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with thirty-six Minnesota American Indian high school students representing both reservation and urban Indian communities, tribal and public schools, and all areas of Minnesota. Participants were selected using purposive sampling for community, type of school, grade point average, and gender. Students were recommended for the study by school counselors, Indian education coordinators, and Indian social worker aides. Three types of students were requested in each school: those doing well (with a 3.0 or better grade point average), students not doing well, and students suspected of being involved in gang activity.

A series of three interviews provided enough time, privacy, and trust so that the student could relate his or her experience, reflect on that experience, and to some extent make sense of it. The first interview explored the student's background and experiences. The second focused on instructional and non-instructional issues that the student felt were helping or hindering the education of Indian students. The final interview explored the student's perceptions of successful schooling and classroom practices as well as suggestions on how to improve the education of American Indian students.

No hypotheses were advanced before the research began. Interview data was sorted into emerging themes and based on the juxtaposition of what the different students said. Category codes based on themes were developed. This method of study is rooted in Grounded Theory, where theory evolves from the emerging data. All the interviews were taped and then transcribed. The results of the study are presented using the voices of the students interviewed. Although students-as-soloists are profiled, their individual voices represent the collective of voices, the chorus of all those interviewed. The most representative, articulate voices speak for the group. This is their song.

Good Teachers

The findings of this study parallel other research on effective teaching and teachers. Good teachers provide active, experiential learning experiences for students. They care for their students in a personal way. This was the resounding conclusion of students interviewed in this study.

> "Cool teachers, one told us about his trips, one science teacher wrote me and he knew a lot about hockey and he knew a lot of stuff that we knew about, that we liked, and he'd tell us about it...Sometimes me and my sister would have a bad day and our French teacher would come help us out, tell us it's all right, you'll be okay."
>
> —*Bobby*

[1] Pewewardy, C. & Willower, D. "Perceptions of American Indian students in public schools," *Journal of Equity and Excellence in Education* 26(1): 52-55. April 1993.

"Good teachers respect my intelligence for the most part. They don't speak down to me. That helps because you have teachers that speak down to you when they're idiots. And that's something I can't stand. That's the quickest way to get me out of the classroom. An ideal teacher is one that treats you as an equal, not just as a pupil. But also there's that pupil-teacher thing going on too, kind of back and forth. I just kind of took over my own schooling because, well, educators are pretty good sometimes, but the most motivation you have to learn is by yourself. If you're not motivated to learn yourself, then you're not really learning."

—Chad

"My freshman year, now that was a good math teacher. You learned a lot and you had fun with it. He kind of incorporated math with other things, rather than just standing up there the whole time. An ideal teacher would be a teacher who could relate what they're teaching to something interesting and that would keep the student's mind working most of the time. Keep the kids attention, but don't let the class do whatever they want, don't be a pushover. Take control of the class and someone who's willing to do one-on-one work after school or before school or something like that. That would be the ideal teacher."

—Shane

"A boring teacher is a teacher that stands up and talks and talks and they don't change their voice. And they just keep on talking and talking the same old stupid voice and its like you want to go to bed. I like to do things. Phys. ed. [physical education] teachers are cool, [because] they play and join the activities. They make it fun. They know every student pretty good."

—Angela

Conversely, these American Indian students don't care for teachers who don't care about them as individuals, or teachers who give up on them.

"Schools are really hard on kids if you're not making the grade. They really come down hard on you. I was failing civics last year and the teacher was nice about it 'cause he knew I was sick all the time. He knew about my allergies. But my counselor and a couple of my other teachers came down on me saying I might just as well drop out, 'cause I'm not gonna be anything when I grow up. One teacher was trying to tell my mom I was never gonna be anything. I was just a waste of time."

—Hillary

Racism in Public Schools

An overwhelming chorus of voices echoed the concern that a combination of racism and Indian content being ignored in the curriculum was a primary concern of many Indian students.

"I haven't heard nothing about Native Americans. It's completely based on Caucasians. In English I have never heard nothing about a Native American author, nothing about Native American language. There's one culture class. I'd like it to tell us more about the background and the culture of Native Americans on the positive side of it and not just the negative. Racism, I get tired of it. Some times I feel like the teachers treat the Caucasians different than the minorities. Schools need more minority teachers to teach the Caucasians about what the minority has gone through. I want to learn the minority side!"

—Rachel

"I think the racial part of school was pretty hard for me, kind of, we were always fighting. There were only like five Indians in the whole school and the rest were white. They'd say racial remarks and you know we'd get mad."

—*Bobby*

Developing a Cultural Identity

Student voices were loud and clear on the importance of American Indian content and culture in the schools and the significance of family and community helping to develop a strong cultural identity.

"Marcy Open School was pretty educational...activities were fun, they always had people come in and talk, give presentations of different cultures and stuff. Taught us about different cultures, it wasn't just on U.S. history. During Thanksgiving we'd have a dinner and different cultures brought in different foods that they had. We'd eat together at a table and talk about our cultures and stuff. It really taught me a lot about getting along with different cultures. Usually I was just hanging with the Indians and staying away from other people. That's how I used to be.

The school had mediators if you ever had a fight or something, they came and talked to you, asked you what the problem was, talked to the other person. They weren't racially on one person, they were nice to all of us, nice to everybody.

In ninth grade I hung out with a lot of seniors that were my friends and they really urged me to stay in school. I was always there because they were there.

My grandma knew about our culture and she'd tell me a lot about that. I started singing on the drum and dancing. The drum really kept me going. In order to sing on the drum I had to go to school and that was a good way to keep me in.

My Uncle Scotty told me to stay in school. 'Stay in school and you'll be okay.' He really influenced me, took me to ceremonies with people. He knew a lot about the drum and ceremony songs. 'You'd better stay in school, it's the best for you. Otherwise your going to be looking back when you get older and saying 'Geez, I wish I would have stayed in school,' cause that's what I wish,' he said. That's mostly why I stayed in school, too."

—*Bobby*

"Middle school was fun, I went to the American Indian Magnet School. That's when I first found out about my culture. I learned to drum and sing and now I'm the lead singer for my drum group. When I was in eighth grade, my dad really surprised me on Christmas. He brought out a big box, and in it he had a drum. It had both my brother's and my name on it. That's the drum we've used ever since. He said we made him so proud when we sang, so he made us a drum. I'm seventeen and have never used alcohol or drugs my whole life and I think it's because I really believe in my culture. Everyone in our drum group is alcohol and drug free and that's part of the respect about being around the drum.

I didn't like my history teachers because they never teach anything about Native Americans. I walked into the new room and all I saw on his walls were pictures of Native American people. And I think, okay, I'm going to like this guy. And then when we got to a Native American subject I think he spent about four weeks on it!

School wasn't so great when I went to Johnson. There were about six of us Native Americans and I would get teased, like everyday. 'Pocahontas,' or 'Chief' or 'Warhawk' and all this other stuff. I was just so sick of it and I had to leave that school.

I really don't think I started growing up until I got my culture, cause it's always like, you're always missing something until you find your beliefs. And then the culture is like the first building block. And from there I just kind of went up.

We have an Indian Options Program at school. There are six classes that you can take that are for Native American students; American literature, Ojibwe history, American Indian support and stuff like that. The other teachers in the school integrate their curriculum and I guess it's not too hard to be an Indian in this school.

—*Shane*

The Ideal School

The collective of student voices on what would make for an ideal school for American Indians was a mixed chorus. Echoing voices of several Indian students follow.

"What would the ideal school for an American Indian be like? The ideal school would depend on that native, that person. It wouldn't just be the ideal school for everybody and you can't please everybody at one time. You might have a bad teacher. The student might just not want to learn at all. It would not be ideal for everybody."

—*Minzie*

"[The] ideal school would definitely not have just American Indians in it. You need a large peer group with a lot of different ideas and thought in it. You have to have that to broaden people's minds, perspectives. Encourage people to really reach out with their studies and their thoughts instead of sticking to the same old curriculum and more freedom to work on independent projects, giving students more freedom of choice. It's important to have more Indians in the classroom, you know, a peer group, that's always good. Someone that comes from the same background as you, that is pretty important. Ojibwe language should be taught, it's a dying language and it should be taught by speakers of the language, not people who learn out of a book, a chapter ahead of you. It's like learning about everybody else's culture, we should learn about ours too."

—*Chad*

Student Resilience

This is what students voices say about why they are making it in school and why some of their peers aren't making it.

"Some of the things that have kept me in school are hoping for a better future for myself personally, a chance of going to college, and having a social group is very important.

A lot of students just take the easy classes so they can get the credits and leave, but that doesn't prepare you for anything.

Some of my peers aren't making it in school because they get fed up with it, they get tired of it, they want to go out and get jobs because they are only thinking about that right now. 'Well, I'm eighteen now, I can go party and go and do my own thing. I'm an adult now.' Most people go through that stage, some people just take it a little bit too far.

They try to go back but it's hard, now they've got a job, they're living on their own, or they got a family already."

—*Chad*

"My dad worked on Super Eight Motels, he stuccoed them, so we'd drive around from state to state, so I didn't really have any friends except for the kids that were with you. Three of us in the back seat and we had to lay a head on each shoulder so we could sleep. So really the only friends I had were my brother and sister. Before I was in kindergarten through about the fifth grade, I was probably in and out of about fourteen or fifteen different schools, so I was used to being the new kid. I really didn't know much about being Native American and my dad said if anybody was Native American on his side, they were kind of ashamed of it. He didn't know much about the ways either.

Why do other students fail and I didn't? I have really strong family support. I've surrounded myself with friends who don't drink. The other kids didn't really have anywhere to go, no family or nothing, no family strong base to stand up on. So they just kind of fell. Three girls got pregnant, one's mom was a drug addict, her dad, who knows where he was, at a bar or something. Some kids had no clothes, couldn't afford a winter jacket. Just little things.

Is there a way to teach someone to be tough? I don't think so, I think you just have to want it. The thing that really brought me to it is when my dad stopped drinking. So that kind of put me in the right direction."

—*Shane*

The Influence of Gangs

Many young people who were interviewed felt school personnel had a tendency to over-identify and misidentify Indian students as gang members when in reality most are not. This mistaken notion, according to the students, is based on both the dress and perceived demeanor of some young Indian people: the baggy clothing (urban gear), hanging belt, musical tastes (especially students whose music includes rap, hip hop, and rhythm and blues littered with lyrics about violence or profanity), the bob tails, black lip stick and nail polish fashions of some young women, and students who imitate the swagger and speech ("Was' up, man?" for example) of urban street talk.

The predominant reason more young Indian people are identified with gangs, according to the students interviewed, is simply that they are Indian, and therefore look different than non-Indian students. According to Indian students, non-Indian students also wear baggy clothing, also listen to rap or hip hop, as well as 'r and b', but they are rarely targeted as gang members. Nevertheless, these students felt that gang involvement has become a real problem in Indian communities, with former Twin Cities gangs like the Native Mob and Vice Lords evident in both urban and reservation Indian communities.

The reasons young people join gangs seem simple enough: intense peer pressure during adolescence, group support, or as a replacement 'family' for their real, and sometimes dysfunctional, family. Alexis, an urban American Indian student, summed up these reasons:

> "A gang is a group of people who come together and kind are like a family. They are there for each other. And people go to them, I think, because they don't have enough care or love at home. So they find a group of people who also have that in common, they group together and they form a family."

While her initial description of why young people join gangs seems almost positive, she goes on to describe the life in gangs:

> "It's not positive because they do a lot of horrible things. You fight for your gang, and that's like an initiation. It's like its own little world. If you are not in the right gang then you better get out of there or you'll be killed."

What may be a solution to keeping young Indian people out of gangs? Replace the negative aspects of gang involvement with all the positive aspects of Indian culture, according to the young people we interviewed. Going to pow-wows and other cultural events gets students involved in positive things, and can supplement their need for family. Moreover, this cultural immersion needs to begin early, and school bears some of the responsibility for teaching it.

> "I think you want to start it when they [young people] are really little. And just keep pushing it on them throughout their whole grade school. And if they know where they are coming from it will make it a lot easier when you come here [to high school]. I think a lot of us are just lost. Searching for something to belong to."
>
> —*Melissa*

Are There Solutions?

Despite state, tribal, and local efforts at implementing special educational programs for American Indian students, many of these students continue to drop out of Minnesota's schools at rates remarkably similar to those reported nearly thirty years ago. Perhaps part of

the problem lies in the complexity of the issues, the inability of institutions to deal with complex issues, and the piecemeal nature of programs themselves.

> The program approach in American Indian education has failed for a variety of reasons. Most of these programs were either too little, too late, or not enough, or simply bad ideas. Generally speaking, programs attacked an issue and ignored a whole set of other issues. The piecemeal nature of programs has not been able to break through the nearly impervious nature of institutional and overt racism in this country.[2]

Institutions such as schools and programs may not be able to adequately deal with the overwhelming issues of societal racism and dysfunction, and a more holistic approach may be necessary.

> There is a need to look at the *whole* of American Indian education, to consider integrating issues and solutions. Using this approach, we simultaneously recognize and deal with issues in their complexity. Schools cannot be expected to deal with all the social, psychological, and educational needs of children if the communities in which the children come from are out of harmony and balance. Schools cannot effectively integrate American Indian culture and language into the curriculum or hire more American Indian teachers and administrators if racism in schools is not confronted.[3]

Moreover, part of the solutions to these complex issues may lie in individual students themselves; hence, there is need for research to look closely at resilience and intrinsic motivation in American Indian students. Why do some students from the same family or similar circumstances succeed, even flourish in schools, and some don't? Why are some students less negatively affected by racism or by poor teaching and schools which ignore their basic social, cultural, and psychological needs? Why do some reject gangs and drugs, not get pregnant, and deal with all the other complex issues inherent to institutional and societal dysfunction? Why do these issues claim so many victims while some rise above it all, seemingly despite all odds, and triumph in spite of it all? These are complex and important issues in need of more investigation.

American Indian students in this study suggested that teachers will have more success with students if they use active, experiential methods in teaching; if they don't give up on their students or push them out of schools in any way; if schools target both the curricular inclusion of minorities and the racism these students feel permeates schools. Finally, they see the need for a variety of "ideal school" situations as key to solving the complexity of issues of Indian education.

The problems of American Indian education cannot wait for research findings proposing solutions to filter down from scholarly journals, or college textbooks, to classroom practice. Time is running out. There are things to be accomplished; purposeful and hopeful futures for students to be found. Minnesota's Indian children deserve it and American Indian people should demand it. Local school boards, tribal governments, and legislators need to listen to what American Indian students are saying about their schools and their communities. Every responsible adult from local school boards, tribal officials, legislators, and commissioners of education needs to assure that these students are given voice. These are the voices of our children and grandchildren, our nephews and nieces. Listen to their song.

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None of the students photographed here participated in the interviews. Special thanks to Mr. Pewaush's Ojibwe class at South High in Minneapolis and to the Fond du Lac Reservation High School for the pictures used here.

[2]Cleary, L. Miller & Peacock, T. *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education*. (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), p.253.

[3]Ibid, p254.

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